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ILLITERACY AND DEMOCRACY

BY WINTHROP TALBOT

How many of us who enjoy the printed page realize that five million adult American citizens are wholly unable to read and write; that millions more read only simple words; and that still other millions, able to read hesitatingly, rarely do read? A large percentage of American adults are illiterates or near-illiterates, almost wholly isolated from the world of ideas and progress.

Such illiteracy is a barrier to democracy.

Underlying that evolution into industrial, social and political democracy which irritates the conservative, delights the radical, and perplexes all, is the fact that the introduction—not so long ago—of the linotype, monotype, rotary press, and woodpulp paper have put within the reach of everyone the cheap and convenient printed page.

Cheap printing is the ready means of extending thought and information, and makes possible that fundamental intelligence on which democracy is based. Illiterates, however, deprived of this first aid to democracy, retard the progress of us all. In order to claim the privileges of intelligent living, enlarge our opportunities, and enjoy the benefits of substantial government by representation, it is clear that everyone in the community must be equipped with a means of profiting by the knowledge and experience of others, and of becoming informed on all matters of common interest and importance. Without general extension of ability to read and write, how may this be possible?

We have realized the need of compulsory schooling for children who are born Americans; we are beginning to provide for the children of stranger-folk who come to us; yet we ignore the illiteracy of millions of unschooled men and women—children in mind, though adult in years—apparent-

ly forgetting that the first requisite for government by representation is literacy.

Literacy is impatient to-day of the industrial baron. A literate society demands representation. It seeks government by town-meeting or by commission. It exacts growth of every individual, and ample opportunity for it. It criticizes the woman or the man who is domineering and self-important. It requires capacity to set the bounds to accomplishment and the measure of a man's worth to be the quality, type and degree of his contribution to the community.

As illiteracy diminishes, social appreciations grow. We learn to think of others in terms of breadth and complexity and capacity, not of superiority and inferiority. Only people of restricted human understanding to-day can use the terms "upper" and "lower" classes. We are awakening to the fact that special privilege may be reduced only as literacy increases, and that democracy is possible only through the general extension of information and schooling.

Illiteracy, in its final analysis, signifies increased expense for production; lowered wages; segregated profits and the sweat-shop; for how long could the sweat-shop last without people to exploit? Illiteracy means increasing industrial agitation and unrest; it promotes race prejudice and class hatred; it precludes that mutual understanding and ability to co-operate which must underlie well-managed industry and efficient democracy; illiteracy debases political and social standards; it is a clog on intelligent workmanship, homemaking, public health and good citizenship.

It is not by chance that the Colorado mining camps, the West Virginia coalfields, illiterate communities like Lawrence, Mass., and Passaic, N. J., and the great trades employing thousands of illiterate workers in the larger cities, have had many costly strikes. Nor is it mere coincidence that epidemics of disease arise in city and village slums where the illiterate swarm. If we are to handle intelligently such problems as industrial unrest and public health, and promote civic administration and good government, we need to know more about that portion of all our people who read with difficulty, and of that submerged and isolated tenth to whom the newspaper and the printed page are but weird black marks on white paper, and to whom the public notice and the danger-sign are meaningless.

The word "illiterate" in America today stands for

steady *increase* of illiterate white folks by scores of thousands in New England, in the Empire State, in the Garden State, in the Keystone State, in the Prairie State, and in eleven States of the Northwest. These are white people: not Negroes, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, or Hindoos, but young white parents who will rear families and will live among us for the next forty years or more. In large degree they are herded aliens, mingling foreign tongues in village outskirts and city slums, increasing accident and disease, filling hospitals, almshouses and asylums, and, as dependents and defectives, laying big and yet bigger taxes on that community which ignores their existence.

Before analyzing illiteracy in the United States, let us distinguish clearly in our own minds between "illiteracy" and "ignorance"—terms by no means the same, yet often assumed to be synonymous. Some ignorant persons may be literate, but most illiterates are ignorant.

It has long been a choice morsel for the social pessimist and critic of democracy that nearly one-fourth of the population of the Southern States is illiterate. We have been accustomed to think of Alabama, Mississippi, and neighboring States as the "Black Belt," not only with regard to race, but also schooling. It gives a different aspect to the situation to know that each Southern State has cut its percentage of illiteracy more than twenty-five per cent during the last census period from 1900 to 1910, and that in the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central divisions, which include all the Southern States, the number of illiterates was nearly a million (938,767) less in 1910 than in 1900.

Illiteracy may be a hindrance, but it is not a peril, in States which are so active through public school endeavor and otherwise that each decade they are steadily effecting wholesale reductions not only in the percentage but in the number of illiterates. Thus illiteracy is a menace only in the manufacturing States of New England and in the States of the Middle Atlantic division which for ten years—nay, even for twenty years, as in the State of New York—have failed to reduce their percentage of illiteracy and have also increased enormously their numbers of illiterates; or, as in the case of Connecticut, have actually retrograded, and have increased not only in numbers of illiterates but in percentage of illiteracy as well. The New England, Middle Atlan-

tic, Mountain, and Pacific divisions are those which show an increase in the number of illiterates during the last twenty years.

Illiterates are steadily increasing in number, not in the South, but in

Massachusetts	Illinois	New Mexico
Rhode Island	North Dakota	Arizona
Connecticut	Nebraska	Utah
New York	Montana	Nevada
New Jersey	Wyoming	Washington
Pennsylvania	Colorado	California

the heaviest increase being in New England and the Middle Atlantic States. During the twenty years from 1890 to 1910, the number of illiterates in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Florida *decreased* from 2,027,951 to 1,427,063. In Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, the *increase* was from 790,772 to 1,103,872.

Until 1910, native white illiterates outnumbered foreign-born illiterates, but the latter have been increasing rapidly. From 1880 to 1910 the increase in number of foreign-born illiterates was 886,741, whereas the decrease in number of native white illiterates was 721,188, and of negro illiterates 922,269.

The increase in number of foreign-born illiterates by decades has been as follows: 1880-1890: 383,951; 1890-1900: 139,564; 1900-1910: 363,226. Over three million (3,116,182) foreign-born illiterates have been admitted since 1899.

In contrast with the increase of white illiterates, negro illiterates have decreased approximately from 3,150,000 in 1880, to 2,227,731 in 1910. During the last decade all other classes of illiterates—Indians, Chinese, Japanese—have also decreased materially.

Native-born white illiterates have decreased from 2,255,460 to 1,534,272.

Thus every class of illiterate has decreased except the foreign-born, and since the last census their increase has been so great as to out-balance the decrease of all other classes combined.

Means are not lacking for the speedy reduction of adult illiteracy in the United States whenever the public is convinced of the necessity for so doing. Within the next five years the numbers of adult illiterates could be reduced one

half, but an informed public sentiment is pre-requisite. France has halved her illiteracy of late, and so could we; yet it is not long since an almost hopeless view was taken of the problem. It was claimed by one Board of Education in a report on illiteracy that no adequate means existed for reaching the adult illiterate, and that he must be allowed to die off. Fortunately such counsel is as unacceptable as it is vicious, in view of the fact that it has been shown conclusively that the teaching of reading and writing to adults in large numbers as wholly practicable.

One effective measure is the wider use of the public school facilities, and the adaptation of the school mechanism to meet the needs of working people, by establishing co-operative part-time day classes in factories and industrial works, and continuation classes for illiterate house-workers and other illiterate women employed in the home. The evening school is often impracticable, but no convincing argument can be advanced against the co-operative Workers' Class in the place of employment. Such classes have been established in several industries in New York and New Jersey. The Workers' Class requires only an hour a day, five days a week for twelve weeks—sixty hours in all—to enable an adult of moderate intelligence to acquire a knowledge of 600 English words, and to enable him to learn to read, write, and cipher with a surprising degree of ease. In the Workers' Class the public school supplies the teacher and the books, the employer provides the place and opportunity, and the worker the effort.

Most immigrants are beyond ordinary school age, and ordinary school methods are not adapted to their needs. But the brief day-time class at the place of employment is effective in the highest degree, and is advantageous to every one concerned—employed, employer, and the public.

The menace of illiteracy among our foreign population would rapidly disappear, and arguments for imposing a literacy test for admission of immigrants would no longer be needed, if the Workers' Classes and other successful means now in partial operation in some parts of the country were generally used—as the public school part-time class, the evening school, and instruction through private and semi-public associations.

We are at fault in not providing means for adequately enforcing existing legislation regarding the exclusion of the

insane, the degenerate, and the diseased. If this were done, we should automatically exclude the hopelessly illiterate. Nearly ten millions of dollars of unexpended immigrant head-tax is now in the hands of the United States Treasury. If we wish to avoid needless illiteracy, more adequate appropriation should be made for effective medical inspection, now handicapped by insufficient means.

Larger provision should be made for furnishing instruction to adult illiterates through the public school. We require the untaught child to go to school; has not the time come to insist that the untaught child of older years—the adult illiterate—shall also be required to go to school until he learns at least to read and write? Can there be any question that five millions of illiterate adults mentally insulated from exchange of human experience with their fellows are a menace to representative government, democratic institutions, industrial prosperity, and the good of the whole United States?

While objections may properly be made to certain types of State commissions, the problem of illiteracy has been studied so little, and is so wide in its implications, that it affects intimately all State functions, and yet fails to come within the official province of any State department; nevertheless it is a subject requiring special investigation and the widest public knowledge concerning its extent and suitable remedies. Therefore it seems to be a matter which can best be approached and treated through a State commission of citizens who have earned the confidence of the public.

Such a commission has been established by Kentucky to study and remedy its problem of the illiterate, but no States are in greater need of such commissions than the Middle Atlantic division, and especially the State of New York, which harbors a greater number of illiterates than any other State in the Union.

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